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By Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo

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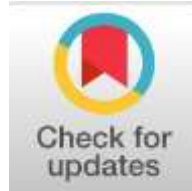
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Role Playing Group Guidance For Interpersonal Communication Among Learning Difficulties Students: Bimbingan Kelompok Bermain Peran Untuk Komunikasi Interpersonal Siswa Berkesulitan Belajar

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Abstract

General Background Fostering social competencies alongside academic achievement is crucial within inclusive educational environments, enabling students to interact and participate actively. **Specific Background** Grade VII students with learning difficulties at SMP Negeri 1 Malinau Kota display passive behavior and low self-confidence, hindering their ability to express opinions and cooperate with peers. **Knowledge Gap** Although experiential counseling methods are recognized for building social skills, empirical evidence regarding their specific application for addressing the unique communication barriers of learning-disabled students in inclusive settings remains limited. **Aims** This study investigates how a six-session experiential counseling intervention simulating real school situations builds foundational communication skills for eight learning-disabled adolescents. **Results** A quasi-experimental, one-group pretest-posttest analysis reveals that the intervention substantially improved the participants' openness, empathy, and conversational confidence. The mean questionnaire scores surged from a low baseline of 44.63% to a high post-intervention score of 80.44%, while the Sign Test confirmed a statistically significant improvement across all participants (Exact Sig. 0.008, $p < 0.05$). **Novelty** This research provides empirical evidence demonstrating that structured experiential counseling directly mitigates specific social interaction barriers for academically challenged adolescents within inclusive schools. **Implications** School counselors must systematically integrate simulated social scenarios into routine group interventions to foster inclusive interactions, requiring robust institutional support for comprehensive psychological development programs.

Highlights

- ♦ Experiential counseling sessions directly address passive behavior and low self-confidence among academically challenged adolescents.
- ♦ Simulating everyday school scenarios substantially improves student openness, empathy, and collaborative conversational skills.
- ♦ Tailored group interventions ensure equitable social participation for marginalized learners within inclusive educational environments.

Keywords

Group Guidance; Role Playing; Interpersonal Communication; Learning Difficulties; Inclusive Education

INTRODUCTION

Education is directed not only to the improvement of academic achievement of students but also is aimed at forming social competencies which allow them to communicate effectively with their surrounding environment. The ability to communicate with other people is one of the social skills necessary for successful learning. Manning (2020) states that interpersonal communication is the process of sending messages between two or more people to understand their ideas, feelings and attitudes by interacting directly, which in the long run leads to positive social relationships. This skill forms the basis for students to work together, express their opinions, solve conflicts, and build healthy relationships with their peers and teachers. Interpersonal communication as an important factor of the school environment for active participation of students in the learning process. Students with good interpersonal communication skills are more capable of expressing their ideas confidently, listening to others' opinions, and actively participating in discussions and collaborative learning activities. Poor interpersonal communication can result in low self-confidence, a reluctance to ask questions, less participation in class discussions, and difficulty in building good social relationships at school (Putri, 2023). It means that poor interpersonal communication affects not only the social development but also the academic achievement of students.

Children with learning difficulties are more likely to have problems with communication. These students often have difficulty not only in understanding academic material, but also in expressing themselves, interacting with other students and communicating effectively with instructors. Learning difficulties are generally also accompanied by limited social skills with passive behaviour, low self-confidence, and difficulty expressing needs and opinions in class activities (Ramadhan, 2023). Failing to attend to these conditions hinders students' academic achievement and social adjustment. These challenges are even greater in an inclusive school where students with different abilities and learning needs come together to learn in one educational environment. According to Ariyani (2020), inclusive education is not only about equal access to education, but it can also provide opportunities for students to socially interact meaningfully with students with different characteristics. Therefore, interpersonal communication is a basic competence that enables students to adapt, collaborate, appreciate diversity and actively participate in learning in the classroom.

Group guidance is a counselling service that can effectively help the development of interpersonal communication. The dynamics of group work create an environment where students can share experiences, exchange ideas, discuss different issues and gain different perspectives in a supportive environment. Guidance in groups is a developmental service that is considered effective because it provides direct opportunities for students to improve their social competencies through structured relations with group members (Safitri, 2021). The success of the group guidance is to a large extent dependent on the methods used in the counselling. A role-play is one of the instructional techniques that is seen as particularly suitable for improving interpersonal communication. As Istarani (2019) pointed out, role playing allows students to simulate various social situations. This helps students to understand how other people feel, develop empathy, practice how to express opinions and reinforce communication skills in real interpersonal contexts. This experiential learning process allows students to develop meaningful communication skills through direct practice instead of passive instruction. The effectiveness of group guidance with role playing technique in improving interpersonal communication of students has been proven empirically through studies. In one group pretest-posttest design, Setyowati and Maharani (2023) found that group guidance with role playing had significant effect on students' interpersonal communication skills. Similarly, Samsaifil and Sari (2022) pointed out that role-play can enhance students' openness in communication, confidence in expressing opinions, and quality of social interaction in the school environment. Moreover, Maghfira (2025) also found that role-playing in group guidance could increase students' interpersonal communication that resulted in more involvement in interaction with peers and teachers in classroom learning.

There is previous research supporting the effectiveness of role-playing methods in improving interpersonal communication, but most of this research has been done in regular school settings. However, there is little research focusing on the effectiveness of this intervention for students with learning difficulties in inclusive schools. Students with learning difficulties have special academic and social characteristics which can influence the effectiveness of counselling interventions. It is therefore necessary to further investigate whether group guidance by means of role-playing techniques is equally effective in inclusive educational settings. This limitation is an important research gap in the current literature. Preliminary study through interviews with twelve subject teachers of SMP Negeri 1 Malinau Kota found that there were some students of Grade VII that had poor interpersonal communication skills. The students were less likely to be active in the classroom, to say fewer opinions, to be reluctant to ask questions when they faced learning difficulties, and to be less involved in group discussions. The first identification with subject teachers, identified eight students of grade VII who were characterised by low interpersonal communication skills. These students showed the following behaviours: lack of self-confidence among their peers, avoiding social contact, lack of eye contact in conversations, difficulty in expressing opinions, poor collaboration in group work, and reduced participation in class discussions. Furthermore, these students were diagnosed as having learning difficulties, which means problems in academic performance as well as social adaptation.

Based on the considerations above, this study aims to determine the effectiveness of group guidance with role-playing techniques to improve the interpersonal communication of Grade VII students with learning difficulties in an inclusive junior high school. The results are expected to provide empirical evidence for the development of guidance and counselling services in inclusive education and practical recommendations for school counsellors to design effective interventions to improve interpersonal communication among students with learning difficulties.

METHOD

This research is quantitative research with quasi-experimental design to examine the effect of role-playing technique on

group guidance service to improve interpersonal communication of students with learning difficulties. The research used a one group pretest and posttest design. The study examined the participant's interpersonal communication abilities before (pretest) and after (posttest) the intervention, without a control group. The reason for choosing this design is that the researcher can measure changes in the same group after the intervention (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Sugiyono, 2022). This research was conducted in the Academic Year of 2026 at SMP Negeri 1 Malinau Kota, North Kalimantan, Indonesia. The population included all the 260 students of grade VII. The sample was eight students selected by purposive sampling with the criteria (1) low interpersonal communication skills, (2) learning difficulties, and (3) no experience in group guidance sessions using the role-playing technique (Sugiyono, 2022).

Data were collected using an interpersonal communication questionnaire with a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The instrument measured five aspects of interpersonal communication: openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness and equality. In addition, interviews were held with subject teachers to assist in identifying students with learning difficulties and low interpersonal communication skills (Kriyantono, 2020). The intervention comprised group guidance sessions through the use of the role play technique. During these sessions, students practiced communication skills, expressed their opinions confidently, understood others' perspectives, and developed positive social interactions through simulated social situations. The data were analysed by using the Sign Test, a nonparametric statistical test used to compare paired pretest and posttest scores by examining the direction of change between two related measurements, particularly when the sample size is small or the assumption of normality is not met (Sugiyono, 2022). Statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. The effectiveness of the intervention was tested at a 0.05 significance level. The results revealed that group guidance with the role-playing technique was effective in improving the interpersonal communication of students with learning difficulties, as indicated by an Exact Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.008 ($p < 0.05$).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of the Study

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Malinau Kota, North Kalimantan, Indonesia. SMP Negeri 1 Malinau Kota is an inclusive junior high school that offers equal educational opportunities for all students including students with learning difficulties. The subjects of this study were eight students of grade VII who were selected by using purposive sampling technique because they had low interpersonal communication skills as indicated by teacher's recommendation, classroom observation, and pretest result. All participants had learning difficulties and had not previously participated in group guidance with the use of the role-playing technique and were therefore fit for an assessment of the effectiveness of the intervention in improving interpersonal communication.

The implementation of group guidance using role-playing technique was done step by step and systematically so that students could join in comfortably with each activity. At the start of the sessions the researcher established a supportive group climate through the use of opening activities, explaining the aims of the service and explaining the rules that would be applied during the sessions. Then, the students were presented with simple scenarios that relate to everyday communication situations at school, such as expressing opinions in discussions, asking questions to teachers, requesting help from peers, and collaborating in group activities. Each session gave students the chance to take turns enacting particular social situations. Following the role play activity, the researcher and the group members held a reflection session to discuss the experiences, challenges, and communication behaviours that emerged during the activity. The purpose of this reflection was to help students understand the importance of openness, empathy, mutual support, positive attitude and equality in building effective inter-personal communication. Thus, the guidance process was not only oriented to the practice of speaking but also to the strengthening of social attitudes and the ability to understand others. During the intervention, the students demonstrated gradual positive behavioural changes. In the first few sessions, a number of students seemed shy, lacking in confidence and tended to be passive when asked to speak in front of the group. However, in the following sessions, students started to show more courage to give their opinions, to respond to their peers and to participate in group discussions. These changes suggest that the role-playing technique affords direct learning experiences for students to practice interpersonal communication in a safe and fun setting.

Research Implementation

This research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Malinau Kota in April 2026. The research consisted of eight sessions, one session for pretest, six sessions of group guidance using the role-playing technique as the intervention, and one session for the posttest. Before data collection, the researcher met with the school principal and the guidance and counselling teacher to discuss the research objectives, procedures, schedule and implementation of the intervention. The participants were then selected through classroom observations, interviews with subject teachers and an initial assessment of interpersonal communication skills. The selection of the research participants was based on the predetermined inclusion criteria and consisted of eight students of Grade VII with learning difficulties and low interpersonal communication skills.

The study started with the pretest which was a 50-item questionnaire on interpersonal communication. The instrument measured 5 aspects of interpersonal communication: openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. The pretest was administered to collect baseline data on students' interpersonal communication skills before the intervention. All participants answered the questionnaire attentively and according to their own experience. Pretest results served as baseline data for comparison with posttest scores after the intervention. After the pretest, the participants attended six group guidance sessions where the role-playing technique was used. Each session was about 45 minutes long and went

through the standard stages of group guidance: group formation, transition, working stage, and termination. The subjects of the intervention were arranged gradually from beginning communication, sharing feelings in an appropriate manner, developing empathy and active listening, sharing opinions in group discussions, developing self-confidence in communication, and settling conflicts by means of effective communication and cooperation. In each session, students experienced simulated social situations closely related to everyday school life, and then engaged in group discussions and reflective activities to evaluate their communication experiences and behaviours.

The researcher observed the participants' engagement during the intervention, responses and behaviour changes. Most of the students were shy and passive in the first few sessions and unwilling to speak in front of their peers. But there were discernible improvements as the intervention went on. Students were more inclined to initiate conversations, express their opinions more confidently, respond appropriately to peers, show empathy and engage actively in group discussions. Changes in interpersonal communication skills were assessed using a posttest with the same questionnaire at the end of the intervention.

Pretest Results of Students' Interpersonal Communication

Before the intervention, a pretest was administered to assess the students' interpersonal communication skills at baseline. The pretest data provided a baseline for assessing the effectiveness of the group guidance intervention with the role-playing technique. The instrument was made up of 50 questionnaire items measuring five dimensions of interpersonal communication including openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality.

Table 1. *Pretest Results of Students' Interpersonal Communication*

No.	Student Code	Score	Percentage (%)	Category
1	K1	98	49.0	Low
2	K2	97	48.5	Low
3	K3	76	38.0	Low
4	K4	81	40.5	Low
5	K5	74	37.0	Low
6	K6	99	49.5	Low
7	K7	95	47.5	Low
8	K8	94	47.0	Low
Average		89.3	44.63	Low

Source: Processed Data (2026).

According to Table 1, the students' pretest scores were between 74 and 99. K6 received the highest score (99 points; 49.5%) and K5 received the lowest score (74 points; 37.0%). The average score was 89.3 or 44.63% which means that the participants' interpersonal communication skills were categorised as low before the intervention. The findings suggest that the participants had serious problems with interpersonal communication prior to entering the group guidance programme. The rather low scores in all measured dimensions suggest the limited ability to express opinions, to communicate confidently, to show empathy to others, to give supportive responses and to establish balanced interpersonal relationships in the school environment. Thus, the pretest results confirmed the need for an intervention to improve the interpersonal communication skills of students. Table 2 presents a distribution of the interpersonal communication categories to give a clearer overview of the initial communication levels of the participants.

Table 2. *Distribution of Pretest Interpersonal Communication Categories*

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	0	0
Moderate	0	0
Low	8	100
Total	8	100

Source: Processed Data (2026).

As seen in Table 2, all eight participants (100%) were categorised in the low interpersonal communication category and no participants reached the moderate or high categories. This finding suggests that all the participants in the research experienced difficulties in interpersonal communication, which corroborates the initial identification made by teachers and classroom observations. In general, the pretest results show that the participants' interpersonal communication skills were insufficient before the intervention, with an average score of 44.63%. These baseline results justified the implementation of group guidance using the role-playing technique as an intervention to improve students' interpersonal communication. Moreover, the pretest scores served as a benchmark for comparing the posttest results in evaluating the intervention's effectiveness.

Posttest Results of Students' Interpersonal Communication

After completion of the six group guidance sessions with the role-playing technique, the posttest was administered. The posttest was performed to assess the students' interpersonal communication skills following the intervention and the efficacy of the treatment. For the comparability of scores before and after the intervention, the same 50-item questionnaire of interpersonal communication used in the pretest stage was given.

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Table 3. *Posttest Results of Students' Interpersonal Communication*

No.	Student Code	Score	Percentage (%)	Category
1	K1	159	79.5	High
2	K2	153	76.5	High
3	K3	179	89.5	High
4	K4	171	85.5	High
5	K5	173	86.5	High
6	K6	157	78.5	High
7	K7	149	74.5	Moderate
8	K8	146	73.0	Moderate
Average		160.88	80.44	High

Source: Processed Data (2026).

Table 3 indicates that the posttest scores were between 146 and 179. K3 achieved the highest score with 179 points (89.5%), while K8 obtained the lowest score with 146 points (73.0%). The sum of all participants' scores is 1287. The average score is 160.88, which is equal to 80.44% in the high category. The findings revealed that the group guidance programme had significantly improved the students' interpersonal communication compared to the baseline assessment. The improvement was noticeable in all participants. Students were more confident in expressing their opinions, more active in group discussions, more appropriate in their responses to peers, and more empathetic and cooperative in interpersonal interactions. These findings indicate that the group guidance sessions with role-play technique were effective in helping students improve their interpersonal communication skills through direct practice and experiential learning. To give a clearer overview of students' interpersonal communication levels after the intervention, the distribution of posttest categories is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Distribution of Posttest Interpersonal Communication Categories*

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	6	75.0
Moderate	2	25.0
Low	0	0
Total	8	100

Source: Processed Data (2026).

Table 4 shows that there are six students (75.0%) in the high category and the other two students (25.0%) in the moderate category. No participant stayed in the low category after the intervention. This distribution indicates that the majority of students had good interpersonal communication skills after joining group guidance by using role-playing techniques. The posttest findings show a substantial improvement in the interpersonal communication of all the participants as compared to the pretest findings. The mean score of interpersonal communication increased from 44.63% (low category) in the pretest to 80.44% (high category) in the posttest, an increase of 35.79 percentage points. The descriptive findings indicate that before statistical hypothesis testing, group guidance using the role-playing technique had a substantial contribution to the improvement of interpersonal communication skills of students with learning difficulties.

Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Results

To provide a clearer description of the improvement in students' interpersonal communication, a comparison of the pretest and posttest scores is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. *Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Interpersonal Communication Scores*

Student Code	Pretest (%)	Posttest (%)	Improvement (%)
K1	49.0	79.5	30.5
K2	48.5	76.5	28.0
K3	38.0	89.5	51.5
K4	40.5	85.5	45.0
K5	37.0	86.5	49.5
K6	49.5	78.5	29.0
K7	47.5	74.5	27.0
K8	47.0	73.0	26.0
Average	44.63	80.44	35.81

Source: Processed Data (2026).

As shown in Table 5, all participants improved in interpersonal communication after the intervention. The largest improvement was for K3, with an increase of 51.5 percentage points. The smallest improvement was for K8, with an increase of 26.0 percentage points. And, while the degree of improvement varied, all participants showed a positive difference in interpersonal communication skills from their baseline. The average score of interpersonal communication was 44.63% in the pretest and 80.44% in the posttest. The average increase was 35.81 percentage points. The positive change is indicated by the improvement in the five dimensions of openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality, as

measured by the interpersonal communication framework by DeVito (2019). The results indicated that after receiving group guidance, students were more confident in expressing their ideas, more empathetic towards other people, communicated more positively, and established more effective interpersonal relationships in the school environment. In general, the descriptive results showed that group guidance by using role-playing technique was effective in improving students' interpersonal communication. Following intervention, no participant was in the low communication category and most were in the high category. These descriptive results provide preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention prior to statistical hypothesis testing.

Inferential Statistical Analysis

To determine whether the observed improvement in students' interpersonal communication was statistically significant, a Sign Test was conducted by comparing the pretest and posttest scores.

Table 6. *Sign Test Results*

Comparison	Negative Differences	Positive Differences	Ties	Exact Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest – Posttest	0	8	0	0.008

Source: Processed Data (2026).

As presented in Table 6, the Sign Test yielded an Exact Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.008, which is lower than the predetermined significance level of 0.05 ($p = 0.008 < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was accepted, indicating that group guidance using the role-playing technique had a statistically significant effect on the interpersonal communication of students with learning difficulties. The analysis further showed eight positive differences, no negative differences, and no ties, indicating that every participant demonstrated an improvement in interpersonal communication following the intervention. No participant experienced a decline or maintained the same score after the treatment, suggesting a consistent positive effect across the entire sample. These inferential findings are consistent with the descriptive analysis, which showed that the average interpersonal communication score increased from 44.63% (low category) before the intervention to 80.44% (high category) after the intervention. Taken together, the descriptive and inferential analyses confirm that group guidance employing the role-playing technique effectively improves the interpersonal communication skills of students with learning difficulties at SMP Negeri 1 Malinau Kota.

Discussion

Students' Interpersonal Communication Before the Implementation of Group Guidance Using the Role-Playing Technique

The results showed that the interpersonal communication skills of students with learning difficulties were classified as low, with an average score of 89.30 or 44.63%, before the implementation of group guidance using the role-playing technique. The results revealed that most of the participants had not yet developed effective interpersonal communication skills in the school environment. This was reflected in the students' low willingness to initiate conversations, express opinions, share feelings, respond to peers and actively participate in classroom discussions. Classroom observation revealed that most students were passive in learning activities, lacked confidence to interact with teachers and classmates, and found it difficult to establish positive social relationships. These findings indicate that interpersonal communication is one of the main problems of students with learning difficulties in inclusive schools.

These results are in line with the theory of interpersonal communication proposed by DeVito (2019) which states that effective interpersonal communication is characterised by five essential dimensions, namely openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. The results of the pretest showed that these five dimensions had not yet been developed optimally on the participants. Regarding openness, students were reluctant to express their opinions and feelings when talking to teachers and friends. Regarding empathy, many students did not comprehend the perspective and feelings of the other person, which led to restricted reciprocal interaction. Rarely did we observe participants being supportive, in the form of giving words of encouragement or positive feedback to classmates when communicating. Similarly, the dimension of positiveness was reflected in students' low self-confidence in speaking in front of groups, and the dimension of equality was underdeveloped due to students' difficulty in appreciating differing opinions and interacting with a wider range of classmates.

The low level of interpersonal communication among students with learning difficulties can also be explained by their characteristics academically and socially. Students with learning difficulties often experience problems in receiving, processing and conveying information, which impacts on the effectiveness of interpersonal communication. These limitations have implications for social adjustment, self-confidence, ability to form relationships as well as academic success. Interpersonal communication is developed through constant social interaction that allows individuals to understand themselves, understand others, and build meaningful relationships as noted by Wood (2020). A lack of confidence or negative social experiences can lead to fewer opportunities to interact and therefore, slower development of interpersonal communication skills. The present findings lend support to this perspective in that most participants had limited communication experiences before the intervention. The present results are also in line with previous research by Setyowati and Maharani (2023) and Samsaifil and Sari (2022) which showed that students with low interpersonal communication skills tend to have low confidence in expressing opinions, low participation in group discussions, and difficulties in establishing social relationships with peers. Hence, the baseline condition in this study provided a compelling argument for the use of the role-playing technique in group guidance. The identification of the students' initial difficulties in communication allowed the intervention to be adapted to the developmental needs of the students, making the process of social learning more effective. Thus, the results of the pretest not only describe the initial state of the interpersonal communication of students, but also serve as an empirical basis for the need for systematic interventions aimed at improving the interpersonal communication skills of students with learning difficulties in the context of inclusive education.

Implementation of Group Guidance Using the Role-Playing Technique to Improve Students' Interpersonal Communication

Within the framework of this study, the use of group guidance with the role-playing technique is viewed as a social learning process that gives students the opportunity for direct development of their interpersonal communication skills. The intervention involved six structured sessions with progressive topics, such as initiating communication, appropriate expression of feelings, developing empathy and active listening skills, expressing opinions in group discussions, building self-confidence and conflict resolution through effective communication. The implementation referred to the stages of group guidance proposed by Prayitno and Amti (2019), namely formation stage, transition stage, working stage, and termination stage. These stages allowed for positive group dynamics to take place and students to feel safe, comfortable and more willing to engage in the intervention. The heart of the intervention was the working stage. In this stage, students participated actively in various role-play activities, which simulated real communication situations from everyday school life. Students practiced expressing opinions, communicating feelings, active listening, cooperating with peers, and constructively resolving interpersonal conflicts in these simulations. Following each activity, group discussions and reflection sessions were conducted so as to enable the students to assess their experiences and communication behaviours. The role-play technique helps learners gain social skills through direct experience (Wibowo, 2019).

The observations during the six sessions revealed gradual improvements in students' communication behaviours. At the beginning, most of the participants seemed shy, passive and not confident in talking in front of the group. However, it was found that in the following sessions students were more willing to start a conversation, express their opinions, respond to their peers, and show more empathy and cooperation in interpersonal interactions. These behavioural changes suggest that the role-playing technique was effective in promoting the development of the five dimensions of interpersonal communication proposed by DeVito (2019): openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. Results are consistent with prior research by Setyowati and Maharani (2023) and Samsaifil and Sari (2022) who found that group guidance with the role playing technique is effective in improving students' interpersonal communication skills. Similarly, Huda (2020) stated that role-play is an efficient teaching strategy to improve communication and social skills through learning by doing. Therefore, the use of role-playing technique in group guidance in this study not only provided students with opportunities to practice communication but also created a supportive learning environment that facilitated the gradual and sustainable development of interpersonal communication skills.

Effectiveness of Group Guidance Using the Role-Playing Technique in Improving Students' Interpersonal Communication

The results indicate the effectiveness of the group guidance through the role-play technique in enhancing the interpersonal communication of students with learning difficulties. Descriptively, the overall mean score of interpersonal communication increased by 35.81 percentage points from 44.63% in pretest to 80.44% in posttest. All participants showed higher scores of interpersonal communication after the six intervention sessions. No student was in the low communication category after the intervention. The inferential analysis using the Sign Test supported the descriptive findings, with an Exact Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.008, which was lower than the significance level of 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis was accepted and it was concluded that group guidance with the role-playing technique had a statistically significant positive effect on the improvement of interpersonal communication of students with learning difficulties. Improvements were seen in all five dimensions of interpersonal communication proposed by DeVito (2019) which are openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness and equality. After the intervention, students were better able to start conversations, share their opinions and express their feelings with teachers and peers. They were also found to be more empathetic, more responsive in a supportive way in interactions, more collaborative in group activities, and more respectful of different opinions. Such changes in behaviour show that the role-playing activities improved students' verbal communication skills and the ability to establish healthy interpersonal relationships in the school context.

The role-play technique is experiential and involves active participation of students in real social situations, which explains the effectiveness of the intervention. Students developed progressively more effective communication behaviours by experiencing multiple opportunities to simulate interpersonal interactions, receive constructive feedback, and reflect on their experience. Huda (2020) stated that role-play is an effective teaching strategy because it enhances learning by doing. Sanjaya (2019) argued that role-play enables students to understand situations from different perspectives, thus improving empathy, cooperation, and interpersonal communication. Therefore, improvements observed in this study were not only due to the delivery of guidance materials but also due to meaningful social learning experiences throughout the intervention. The results of this study are consistent with the research results of Setyowati and Maharani (2023), Samsaifil and Sari (2022), and Maghfira (2025) which states that the role-playing technique in group guidance is effective in improving students' interpersonal communication. However, this study contributes to the literature by examining students with learning difficulties in an inclusive school setting, a population that has been relatively understudied empirically. Thus, the results not only confirm the effectiveness of the role-playing technique, but also provide new empirical evidence for its use in guidance and counselling services for students with learning difficulties in inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that group guidance with role playing technique is effective in improving interpersonal communication of Grade VII students with learning difficulties at SMP Negeri 1 Malinau Kota. The average interpersonal communication score increased from 44.63% before the intervention to 80.44% after the intervention. The Sign Test (Exact Sig. = 0.008, $p < 0.05$) supported the effectiveness of the intervention. The Sign Test results showed eight positive differences, no negative differences, and no ties, indicating that all participants experienced improvements in interpersonal communication after the intervention. All dimensions of interpersonal communication, including openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality, were found to be improved, which indicated that students became more confident in initiating communication, expressing opinions and feelings, understanding others' perspectives, providing positive

responses, and developing healthier interpersonal relationships. The findings of this study imply that group guidance with the role-play technique might be an effective counselling intervention to improve the interpersonal communication skills of students with learning difficulties, especially in the context of inclusive education. Based on the results of this study, teachers of guidance and counselling are recommended to carry out group guidance through role playing technique as part of routine counselling services to improve the interpersonal communication of students with learning difficulties by designing activities that mirror real social situations. Schools have the responsibility to enable the execution of structured and sustainable guidance and counselling programmes by providing adequate facilities, time allocation and an inclusive learning environment that is conducive to the social development of students. Students are encouraged to continue to use the interpersonal communication skills they learned during the intervention in both school and social situations to develop better relationships and become more engaged in learning. It is suggested that future researchers should use larger sample sizes, include control groups and examine the effectiveness of the role-play technique at different educational levels or specific dimensions of interpersonal communication. Furthermore, the results indicate that group counselling by means of the role-playing technique can be used as an evidence-based intervention for the promotion of interpersonal communication and social adjustment development in students with learning difficulties from the perspective of inclusive educational settings.

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